CHAPTER 11

Dirty Dancing: Caring for Sloth Bears in India

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An English literature lecturer at Delhi University, Geeta Seshamani, was cruising along the interstate between Agra and Delhi—a major tourist route—when she noticed a large brown blob moving in a most unusual manner between the two freeways. As she came closer, she could see that the brown blob was fuzzy—some sort of a large mammal. Eventually she could see that the animal was a bear—a sloth bear—pacing back and forth on her hind legs in response to the tug of a rope that ran through her bloody, infected muzzle. She bobbed while the man jerking the rope visited windows of cars that slowed or stopped, seeking out tourists, inviting them to take a photograph with the bear, or ride the bear, all the while begging for money. Some passersby were stricken with pity for the bear, others empathized with the beggar, and so they pulled out a few wrinkled Indian rupees; foreigners offered five or ten dollar bills—a small fortune for a beggar in India.

Geeta was horrified—not because she had never seen a "dancing" bear ... she had seen them all of her life. Not because tourists and passersby were foolish enough to pay someone to abuse an animal (again, she had seen this all of her life). There was something about this particular bobbing, bleeding, beleaguered bear that stirred her compassion and sense of responsibility—perhaps the despondent look in the bear's eyes.

Raised in a Hindu home—but not a traditional, vegetarian Hindu home—Geeta had happened into the midst of a duck hunt in her childhood. It was then that she first understood that she had been chosen to be a caretaker for animals. The incident shifted her family to more traditional ways—to a diet free of flesh. Geeta's natural compassion for all creatures continued to grow as she grew, and so it was that, on seeing this bobbing bear, Geeta could not simply walk away and forget. She decided to contact a distant cousin, Kartick Satyanarayan, who also cared deeply about animals. As it turns out, he was working with the New York Zoological Society on a Tiger Conservation Project in the jungles of India. He readily agreed to help Geeta to do something on behalf of India's "dancing" bears. The seeds for Wildlife SOS India had been planted.

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Kalandar People and "Dancing" Bears

Marginalized geographically as well as by poverty and illiteracy, the Kalandar people live scattered throughout the nation of India (in the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Delhi—the capital—and the newly formed states of Jharkhand and Chattisgarh). The Kalandars are traditionally a nomadic people living on the margins of Indian society in tents (bamboo and plastic) or mud huts, who often do not have access to potable water, toilets, or health care.

For centuries the Kalandars exploited sloth bears, forcing them to "dance" for money in the streets. They purchased cubs from a tribal poacher, who snatched them from the wilds of India, separating cubs from their mothers at a very young age, often killing the mothers in the process. Bears were important to the Kalandar people because they had so little. The income from a single "dancing" bear could support an extended Kalandar family of 10 to 12 members: During India's tourist season, which lasts about six months (October to March), dancing bears dependably brought in 150–200 rupees ($3 to $4) a day, considerably more if bolstered by the occasional $5 or $10 bill from a passing tourist. During the off season, Kalandars moved from village to village with these "dancing" bears, and in return for a village performance, received grain, wheat flour, vegetables, and so on. The annual income from one sloth bear would likely be something between 36,000 and 50,000 rupees ($600–$1000 U.S., and *per capita* income in India is just a little more than $1,500).

"Dancing bears" are one of India's most bizarre "livelihoods." For centuries marginalized tribal people poached sloth bears, trained them to "dance," and used them as street performers, soliciting spare change—often aggressively. Kalandars view sloth bears in the same way that people in animal agriculture view cattle and chickens and pigs—nothing more than means to an end, that end being money. Kalandars, like dairy and poultry farmers, do not recognize the animals in their care as individuals, capable of suffering, with hopes and fears all their own. Nor do they think of the suffering they cause when they exploit other animals for personal profit. Kalandars, like those working in animal agriculture, do not form emotional bonds with the animals they own. Dancing bears, like cattle and pigs and turkeys, are viewed as merely a source of income, and so they are disposed of and exchanged as deemed advantageous, and quickly dispatched if sick, old, or otherwise no longer profitable—just as dairy cattle are sent to slaughter when milk production drops. Parting with a bear is not an emotional issue for Kalandars; it is a financial calculation. When a bear cub is available at a reasonable price, they upgrade, selling their trained bear to another Kalandar family for $300 to $500.

Determined to help India's dancing bears, Geeta and Kartick headed straight to the headwaters of the river of suffering—Kalandar villages scattered across India. They traveled to a battery of these remote villages, intent on pinpointing forces supporting the ugly trade in dancing bears, especially socio-economic forces. They quickly realized that asking families to give up their most dependable source of income was not a viable long-term solution ... nor was such an approach compassionate. Instead, in 1995 Geeta and Kartick founded Wildlife SOS (WSOS) in 1995, and set plans in place to help the Kalandar people, to offer them alternative livelihoods—and much more—in exchange for their "dancing" bears.

Over the next decade, Geeta and Kartick spent a great deal of time in Kalandar villages, seeking ways to offer tribal people a brighter future *without* the dirty business of dancing bears. Wildlife SOS also helped Kalandars to improve life in their villages with grants to repair damaged roofs or to establish village wells. Thanks to Wildlife SOS, more than 3000 Kalandar families received micro-funding, job training, skill development, and other vital trainings and grants. To receive such assistance, the Kalandars were only required to surrender their bears peacefully and voluntarily, and sign an agreement stating that they would never exploit wild animals again. In return for bears and guarantees, Wildlife SOS provided each family with seed funds ($1000) to help them establish an alternative business. Once WSOS was well established, complete with bear sanctuaries, Kalandars were offered jobs at Wildlife SOS bear rescue centers. Wildlife SOS bear sanctuaries now employ more than 50 Kalandars, simultaneously promising a brighter future for Kalandars and captive bears.

Kalandar women and children were also offered opportunities to learn skills and work outside the home. More than 600 Kalandar women, once utterly dependent, are now earning an income. Additionally, Wildlife SOS sent Kalandar children to school, paying school fees and buying necessary books and uniforms. Over time, WSOS has enabled more than 800 Kalandar children (whose parents could not afford to send them to school) to attend school. Rather than simply become an additional set of hands for labor, these young Kalandars will have many more possible options for earning an income.

Wildlife SOS offered the Kalandar community a much brighter future than "dancing" bears could ever provide, and as a result, Kalandars surrendered bears and promised never to exploit wildlife again.

India's Bears and Wildlife SOS: Mowgli and Champa

India is home to four bear species—all endangered: Asiatic black bears (Himalayan/moon bears), sun bears (only in north-eastern India, along the

border with Burma), Himalayan brown bears (only at higher altitudes), and sloth bears, which also live in Nepal and Sri Lanka. India's bears are threatened most decisively by human encroachment—by a rapidly expanding and sprawling human population. Human babies grow up to seek jobs, establish homes, and usually create their own babies, an ongoing cycle that has led our species to spread across landscapes, mowing down trees to build homes and plant crops in places where wildlife once lived. India's bears—and many other wild animals in India and around the world—are in grave danger because of ongoing, out-of-control human population growth and subsequent human sprawl.

Sloth bears are listed on Schedule 1—the most protected rank—of India's 1972 Wildlife Protection Act (WPA). Under WPA, it is illegal to "own" bears. (Frankly, "owning" another individual is perverse in any case.) Under WPA laws, forestry officials can arrest anyone caught with a bear. But the Government of India and India's state governments were unable to enforce this law because they had no facilities for rescued bears. Rescuing captive wildlife is not possible without sanctuaries and trained professionals to house and tend displaced individuals. With the help of India's Forest Department and organizations such as International Animal Rescue (IAR) and Free the Bears (FTB), Wildlife SOS provided such facilities. In December of 2002, Wildlife SOS established The Bear Rescue Facility in Agra, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. As a result, between 2002 and 2009—in just seven years—WSOS rescued more than 600 sloth bears. Needless to say, it was necessary to establish three more sanctuaries (in Bangalore, Karnataka; Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh; and Purulia, West Bengal). Wildlife SOS sanctuaries enabled government officials to confiscate any bears who were not voluntarily surrendered. Wildlife SOS success provides a working

FIGURE 11.1 *Sloth Bear*

model for activists in other nations seeking to enforce wildlife laws that are currently blocked by a lack of facilities and/or trained professionals.

Wildlife SOS also models a host of happy bears, such as Mowgli and Champa. Wildlife SOS staff found Mowgli shivering over a bowl of milk in a Kalandar village when he was yet too young to drink from a bowl. His tiny nose was bleeding profusely from the coarse rope that his "owners" had already inserted into his body. He had recently been castrated—likely with a rusty metal blade—and infection had set in. He was just four weeks old, and it is unlikely that Mowgli would have survived if WSOS staff had not found and confiscated the wee bear—cub survival rates in Kalandar villages (at the time) was less than 50 percent.

A few days later, Champa, was discovered in the same village, about the same age and in about the same condition as Mowgli. When WSOS staff introduced Champa and Mowgli, the two babies ran around each other, dashing here and there, leaping and bounding as they went, tumbling and rolling on the ground. Since that day, they have been inseparable ... and have stirred up their share of trouble. Champa and Mowlgli love to ambush other bears—especially if they can sneak up while neighboring bears are peacefully at rest. If they cannot find a napping neighbor to startle, they seek out WSOS staff in the hope of waylaying caretakers who are busy burying or hanging food (part of enrichment feedings). Champa and Mowgli are always right in the middle of things, disturbing sleepy bears and derailing constructive staff efforts.

It is almost certain that Champa and Mowgli, rescued from the same village at roughly the same time, so visibly happy to see each another, are brothers. At WSOS, despite having been robbed of their mother, despite the painful future they once faced, these two naughty youngsters are busy about the business of being bears. When they are on good behavior (not often), these two pals dig for hidden treats, clamber in the branches of trees, or splash vigorously in their pools. Rather than shifting their feet at the end of a biting rope, they are relaxing, playing, and causing trouble at WSOS, where we hope they will live a long and peaceful life—despite the trouble they stir up for their good natured caretakers.

Ravena: The Beauty and Pain of Rescue and Rehabilitation

Raveena is another bear who found her way to The Bear Rescue Facility in Agra. Like most arriving bears, Raveena was timid and malnourished—almost 70 kilos (154 pounds) lighter than she should have been. On arrival, Dr. Arun Sha, a WSOS Wildlife Veterinarian, assumed responsibility for her care. She was

kept as quiet as possible during her first week in quarantine. In her second week, she was placed under anesthesia and the rope that had held her in slavery throughout her life, up to that point, was removed. After living at the end of a rope for many years—years in which any unwanted behavior was savagely punished—she was visibly distressed by the rope's removal, unsure what was expected, fearful of what would next befall her. She rocked back and forth in her cage, her eyes expressed resignation, confusion, and outright terror.

Each step in Raveena's recovery and rehabilitation was a struggle—as for most rescues. She had learned to fear human beings, and she had learned to live with a great deal of pain. Dr. Sha cleaned the pus and blood from Raveena's torn muzzle, sutured the flesh, then applied a topical antiseptic and antibiotic to help her wounds heal. Dr. Sha also removed what was left of her canine teeth, which had been shattered by the Kalandars, along with any other teeth that had been damaged and eroded by years of malnutrition. He ran blood tests on Raveena to check for lingering infection, and took a preliminary ultrasound of Raveena's abdominal cavity to check for respiratory diseases via thoracic radiography. As the weeks passed, Raveena slowly but surely gained weight on a special WSOS diet of fruits, honey, and porridge, which she received twice daily. Eventually she began to take an interest in her surroundings, and to demonstrate less fear and dread—she was on the road to recovery, even showing signs of trust.

Raveena had been confiscated from a Kalandar community in Uttar Pradesh, and it is safe to assume that her past was probably typical of many rescued bears. She was torn from her mother at a very young age, likely at about four weeks, when her eyes and ears were on the verge of opening to the wind-shifted leaves and bustling insects that enlivened her natural home. No doubt she had at least one other sibling to tumble and explore with—but her mother was the center of Raveena's world. Mother bears are fierce, protecting their cubs at any cost—even against hopeless odds. Doubtless, Raveena's mother bravely defended her little ones, but a mother bear is no match for a hunter's gun. So it was that Raveena lost her mother, her freedom, and her homeland in that fraction of a second in which a poacher pulled the trigger. The poacher scruffed her and her siblings and tossed them into the darkness of a course, rough sack woven from jute fiber. No doubt Raveena screamed and cried for her mother, but the poacher held fast to his loot—worth as much as 20,000 rupees ($400 U.S.), several month's worth of income for many Indian people.

Raveena was terrified, especially of her captors. Everything that would happen to her in the hands of the Kalandar villagers who bought her would reinforced this initial fear of human beings. First, without anesthesia, a crude red-hot iron rod was inserted through the flesh of her soft muzzle and tiny

nostrils, searing holes through her flesh. Her new "owners" thrust a thick, coarse rope through these fresh wounds. Next, Raveena was pinned against the ground while they knocked out her canines with a metal rod. Her new masters were not done disfiguring her tiny body—she still had claws with which she might one day fight. Again without anesthesia, Kalandars extracted her claws, causing unbelievable pain, and removing her last means of defense.

With a dirty rope running across raw edges of fresh wounds, Raveena's nose and muzzle bled and swelled, and was soon infected. Her muzzle, likely the most sensitive part of her body, was in excruciating pain—a pain that she would have to learn to live with. She whimpered and cried when Kalandar's yanked on the rope and beat her feet with sticks, forcing her to lift her feet in agony and terror—forcing her to "dance." Nocturnal by nature, Reveena was expected to perform this bizarre dance-of-agony for many hours each day. If she was lucky, she would be fed one thick roti and a small bowl of milk in exchange. Oftentimes her "owners" only tossed scraps of junk-food in her direction—she was always hungry. At night, when she would normally have roamed the forests of India with her mother and siblings, she stood immobilized at the end of a short rope—trapped in a human world of exploitation and deprivation.

Raveena's ailments and wounds were very serious when she reached Dr. Sha, but no worse than many other rescued "dancing" bears he had treated, who now contentedly slobbered while they ate fresh fruit in WSOS pens just beyond Raveena's quarantine area. Her future was certainly more hopeful than her past, and when Dr. Sha had completed WSOS quarantine protocol, Raveena was released into a special pen with other rescued bears to be socialized, where she settled in gradually and with visible pleasure.

But Raveena's ugly past was not so easily shed. After only a year with WSOS, she fell ill, showing signs of neurological trauma. With special permission and help from the local forestry department, Dr. Sha transported Raveena to a human hospital in order to perform a multitude of tests, including an MRI, CT-scan, and radiography. Unfortunately, these tests revealed nothing. With no clue as to what was causing Raveena's decline, the veterinarian could only treat her symptoms, most importantly, her pain. Dr. Sha watched her slide back down the mountain he had helped her to so laboriously climb, feeling helpless. Her rapid demise was made yet more painful to witness because of her growing trust and innate patience—she had clearly come to understand that WSOS staff were on her side—that she could trust them. Much to the sadness of those who knew her, Raveena slipped beyond the borders of life after only four days after being placed in intensive treatment, leaving shattered caretakers behind.

A post mortem exam revealed the cause of Raveena's sudden, acute misery and premature death—rabies. Raveena was the first bear in which a veterinarian had witnessed the symptoms of rabies, and her symptoms were not typical of rabies in other species. While unable to save Raveena, a new WSOS medical protocol was established with her passing—all quarantined bears are now routinely vaccinated for rabies.

Raveena came to WSOS riddled with physical and mental damage, in perpetual pain, as she had remained during eight agonizing years as a "dancing" bear. Under human control she lost her mother, her freedom, her habitat, her means of self-defense, her health and vitality, and pretty much every activity that is natural for a sloth bear. She experienced long days of hunger and the effects of serious malnutrition. Her paws were damaged and infected from walking on hot pavement; the rope wounds in her muzzle were always raw and infected, and her emaciated body was riddled with parasites. Tied to a short rope, devoid of claws and canines, she could not even protect herself against marauding nonhuman animals—which left her with a disease (rabies) that, despite excellent veterinary care, ultimately robbed her of her life.

Veterinary Care at WSOS Sanctuaries

Almost every sloth bear arrives at WSOS with an encyclopedia list of disorders, ailments, and peculiarities. Poor nutrition, lack of veterinary care, and never-ending stress create a host of predictable medical problems such as external and internal parasites, maggot wounds on paws, severe gum disease, and rotting tooth stumps where canines have been purposefully broken. Their immune systems are usually compromised, and some suffer from the onset of tuberculosis, which they contract from the Kalandars. Diseases, especially tuberculosis, remain a major cause of death among rescued sloth bears.

Nonetheless, if rescued sloth bears can be nurtured through their first year in sanctuary, they usually live for many years to come. Wildlife SOS employs nine veterinarians (and even more veterinary assistants) to care for the many needs of rescued "dancing" bears. New WSOS arrivals are quarantined for three months for tests and observation, during which time they are assessed, given primary care, and treated for ailments and injuries. A veterinary clinical record is established for each arriving individual, and human contact is minimized during this first week, usually to just 3 or 4 caregivers, reducing stimulation and stress for these traumatized rescues.

In the first week, a long-term program is set in motion. While much change is needed, sudden change is stressful, and initial bear-care is designed to encourage new arrivals to settle in peacefully. Consequently, the Kalandar rope remains throughout each bear's first week at WSOS, and his or her diet is

only gradually changed. Digestion is a serious problem in the early stages of rehabilitation because "dancing" bears often live on white flour—unhealthy even for human beings who create this "food"—since they were very young. As a consequence, their digestive systems are not properly developed and their colons cannot cope with natural bear food. New arrivals are therefore given 50–100 grams of glucose and 20 grams of electrolyte powder mixed with 2–3 liters water, as well as 2–3 liters of milk (that has been boiled and cooled to be sure no pathogens are introduced). Only very slowly can natural foods (such as seasonal fruits—watermelon, papaya, pineapple, jack fruit, graphs, and oranges) be introduced into their diets.

In the second week, the Kalandar rope is removed, usually leaving a rescued bear confused and nervous. Sometimes they shake their heads violently, as if still fighting a rope. Most often, they stand in one place, neurotically rocking back and forth. During this second week, veterinarians inject liver stimulants (belamyl, stronic, etc.) to help restore liver health, and routinely examine scat and urine to detect any abnormalities. Staff also observe the temperaments of new arrivals in order to assess how best to serve a particular bear's needs.

In the third week, rescued bears are dewormed, and vaccinated against infectious diseases (rabies, leptospirosis, tetanus). In the final week of their first month of quarantine, they are tranquilized for a complete clinical examination. While bears are "asleep" veterinarians inspect ears and eyes and perform a clinical analysis of various biological parameters, including full body measurements. Veterinarians also test for TB on a bear's eyelids and ears, and collect blood in order to test for hepatitis, rabies, TB, and leptospirosis. Finally, before the bear returns to consciousness, necessary X-rays are taken, an ultrasound performed, and visible injuries are treated.

In the second month of quarantine, veterinarians firmly establish normal parameters for a given bear through continued urine/scat analysis, blood samples, and observations. Bears are given booster vaccines, and ongoing treatment is offered for any medical problems detected in their first month of care. These treatments continue through the last month of quarantine, as necessary. WSOS staff watch each bear to be sure that he or she is healing and adjusting as expected. They also expose rescues to WSOS fencing, and assess each bear's compatibility with others in preparation for release into the best-suited sanctuary pen. During this last month of quarantine, rescued bears are introduced to their first enrichments—food puzzles and toys!

After three months of quarantine, assuming rescues prove to be healthy, they join other bears in a WSOS sanctuary pen, where they begin a much longer, slower process of recovery. They are provided with round-the-clock veterinary

care and enrichments that allow sloth bears to "forage." In time, rescues discover their inner bear—they climb trees, dig shallow pits (for napping—a favorite sloth bear activity), play in water pools, roll in the dirt, and wrestle or mock fight with other bears. While WSOS bear sanctuaries cannot provide sloth bears with anything like their normal range or natural habitat, or anything like a natural foraging experiences, compared with life at the end of a rope in a Kalandar village, they have entered paradise.

It is important that rescued bears find a slice of heaven at WSOS sanctuaries because they can never be released into the wild. Most of them have been in captivity since they were very young cubs. Their mothers did not live long enough to teach them how and where to forage, or what dangers to avoid. Additionally, Kalandars mutilate "dancing" bears—breaking teeth, pulling claws, castrating males—rendering them defenseless. Rescued bears also tend to show signs of psychological damage, exhibiting stereotypic behaviors such as endlessly weaving their heads in a particular pattern, or pacing. Rescued "dancing" bears at WSOS sanctuaries are almost always home to stay—and WSOS provides a very fine home, indeed.

Caring for hundreds of sloth bears over the past two decades, WSOS veterinarians have established basic standards of care, and collected vital medical information on this reclusive, endangered species, including statistics regarding blood-work, skeletal structures, and diseases such as tuberculosis, leptospirosis, rabies, infectious canine hepatitis, and canine adeno viral infection. WSOS veterinarians have unexpectedly become a source of vital information internationally, helping others who rescue and tend captive sloth-bears.

Wildlife SOS Projects and Possibilities

Wildlife SOS currently cares for more than 400 rescued sloth bears—much more than any other organization in the world. Each bear will hopefully live a long, full life (20–25 years), with all the advantages of a nutritious diet and regular veterinary care, protected by well-maintained, secure enclosures. Rani, the very first bear rescued by WSOS, still naps under the trees of her ample pen, and rolls in the grass, flashing her teeth or swatting at youngsters when they get out of line.

WSOS continues to work with the Kalandar people, fostering sustainable livelihoods and ensuring that these distant communities are not tempted to exploit sloth bears for profit, thereby working to prevent any resurgence of the trade in bear cubs. By eliminating demand, WSOS has seriously diminished poacher profits, protecting mother bears and their cubs even in India's most

remote regions. With cooperation of India's government enforcement agencies, WSOS has also been effective in uncovering and cracking poaching rackets and smuggling rings. As humans encroach more and more on less and less wilderness, poachers have gained increased access to once secluded habitats and wildlife, and the international trade in bear parts is lucrative: Body parts (gallbladder, penis, paws, bones, etc.) are now worth more than a live cub.

Geeta and Kartick continue to guide Wildlife SOS on a course that they hope will bring lasting change to protect India's wildlife. Wildlife SOS is collecting and saving funds in order to purchase private agricultural land adjoining bear habitat in the state of Karnataka. These lands will be reforested, providing both worthy jobs for interested Kalandars as well as a safe haven for bears and every other creature who lives in the area. WSOS is also implementing programs designed to mitigate the causes and effects of climate change, and fostering research directed at a richer understanding of biodiversity and the specific needs of India's ecosystems and wildlife. WSOS has even founded and now manages sanctuaries for leopards, reptiles, and Asiatic bears, and is currently establishing an elephant sanctuary.

Any one of us can help WSOS to carry out these worthy programs. WSOS maintains a strong volunteer and internship program through which volunteers from around the world are able to work at India's rescue centers, learn about caring for wildlife at sanctuaries, and at the same time, experience local culture and traditions. (Living in India is comparatively inexpensive for Westerners, and India is a fabulous place to visit.) Volunteers and interns pay a comparatively small fee (put towards boarding and lodging), and of course they pay for their journey to India. In exchange, volunteers gain precious hands-on experience working alongside experienced WSOS staff with India's remarkable wildlife, including sloth bears. (For details, email info@wildlifesos.org or visit http://www.wildlifesos.org.)

But we need not go to India to help WSOS—or to help bears or other endangered or harmed beings. If we come upon *any* abused animal—whether in India, Thailand, or Italy, whether exploited for entertainment, labor, or food—*we must never offer any incentive or encouragement.* Instead, take pictures and send photos of the animals (and their exploiters) to an organization working such as Wildlife SOS (WSOS), International Animal Rescue (IAR), World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA, which has affiliates around the world), or Human Society International (HSI). Use caution, but do not be intimidated by abusers. Without help from those of us who pass their way, these helpless victims are unlikely to ever escape the grip of abuse.

Seven years after Geeta noticed that bobbing, brown "dancing" bear along the Agra-Delhi highway, that very bear was rescued by Wildlife SOS, and she is alive and well in the Agra Bear Rescue Facility. Now a senior bear, she naps peacefully in the sun in her ample, forested enclosure. Because Geeta did not pass by and conveniently forget what she had seen, because Geeta and Kartick took action, that very bear found a slice of heaven—and there are no longer *any* "dancing" bears in India. India's last "dancing" bear was rescued and carried to the safety of a WSOS sanctuary in 2009. It just goes to show what can happen when those who witness animal abuse take responsibility and take action.